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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the function and effects of recent government reform of higher education in the United Kingdom particularly on quality assurance and quality assessment. The reforms have aimed to make institutions more akin to business and have used the language and techniques of "management." It is argued, in agreement with Michel Foucault, that Jeremy Bentham's panopticon prison provides an instructive model. In a panopticon, a tower is situated at the center of a courtyard surrounded by buildings of cells with each cell window under direct scrutiny of the tower and each inmate visible to the surveillant alone. The cells are theaters in which each actor is alone, individualized and constantly visible. It is further argued that such a prison is a model for understanding the new management practices in higher education and how these function to control, classify and contain teachers. Thus, quality control exercises actually lead to a lowering of academic standards. The paper also argues that current education policy can be usefully analyzed in terms of discourses of power and their relation to systems of control and bureaucratic surveillance and that current policy has been constructed in accordance with a political agenda for social control and ideological reordering with devastating consequences for intellectual freedom and student learning. (Contains 15 references.) (JB)

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'HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE PANOPTICON PARADIGM: QUALITY ASSESSMENT AS "DISCIPLINARY TECHNOLOGY"'

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Introduction

Recent government reforms of education have had the explicit aim of making Institutions of Higher Education more akin to businesses and have made increasing use of the language and techniques of 'management'. Each piece of new legislation has been justified through the use of market metaphors, most redolent among these being 'making the system more cost-effective', 'improving efficiency', 'enhancing productivity and performance', 'providing value for money' and 'giving consumers more choice' (Selwyn and Shore 1993). The introduction of 'on-line' management and other strategies for streamlining university structures are aimed, ostensibly, at improving the efficiency and quality of teaching and research in higher education. Such strategies include the redefinition of lecturers' responsibilities, the 'rationalisation' of teaching resources, and the increasing use of mission statements, appraisal, auditing and statistical indices of staff performance in the allocation of funding. Despite talk of devolving responsibility to teaching staff, the result has been a *de facto* centralisation of power and authority.

This paper sets out to consider both the functions and the effects of these reforms, focusing in particular on the quality assurance and quality assessment exercises. Drawing upon Jeremy Bentham's model of the panopticon, taken up by Foucault in his study of the treatment of deviance and crime in capitalist societies, we suggest that the panopticon prison provides a paradigm for understanding not only the processes by which higher education is being restructured, managed and controlled, but also the rationalist epistemology that underlies government notions of 'administrative efficiency' and 'good management'. Thus, this paper situates itself theoretically within that growing body of literature concerned with the analysis of new management practices and discourses in education and the way these function as disciplinary technologies designed to control, classify and contain teachers (Ball 1990a; 1990b; cf Rabinow 1986; Burchell et al 1991). Following Ball's recent critique, we argue that current education policy can be usefully analysed in terms of discourses of power and their relation to systems of control

and bureaucratic surveillance. Using Foucault's model of disciplinary power, we suggest that, far from improving performance and quality in teaching and research, current policy has been constructed more in accordance with a political agenda, the aim of which is social control and ideological reordering. The result of this is likely to have devastating consequences for intellectual freedom and student learning in higher education.

Foucault's Panopticon: A Paradigm for Modern Education?

Foucault's ideas provide an excellent framework for analysing the institutional context in which modern education has emerged. Moreover, there are interesting parallels to be drawn between current policy initiatives and those conditions of existence for the institutions of mass schooling which have come to shape so much of our society.

Much of Foucault's work focuses on the emergence of the modern state and the problem of government.[1] His argument is that the management (or policing) of individuals as labour through the medium of rational scientific (or pseudo-scientific) knowledge of the population was 'an indispensable element in the development of capitalism' (Foucault 1978:140-141).[2] In Discipline and Punish he explores the various ways in which, during the seventeenth century, the human body became an object to be manipulated and controlled through the creation of institutions such as hospitals, asylums, prisons, factories and schools. What Foucault calls a new set of 'disciplinary technologies' - or techniques for organising new configurations of knowledge and power - came together around the objectification of the human subject. The aim of these technologies was threefold: to achieve the exercise of power at minimal cost or effort; to extend the effects of social power to their maximum intensity and as discretely as possible; and third, to increase the docility and utility of all the elements of the system. In short, the aim of these disciplinary technologies was to forge, in the most economic and rational way possible, 'a docile body that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved' (Foucault,

cited in Rabinow 1984:17). The standardisation of action and behaviour through institutions thus provided a disciplinary grid for the organisation of space, time, work and many other aspects of human behaviour. Typically, such a grid involved the projection of military models onto industrial or educational organisation.

As Foucault points out, Jeremy Bentham's blueprint for the panopticon prison provides a vivid, paradigmatic example of how such technologies function as systems of social control. The panopticon consists of a tower situated at the centre of a large courtyard, surrounded by a series of buildings divided into levels and cells. Each cell window falls under the direct scrutiny of the tower and each inmate is visible to the surveillant alone. The cells thus become 'small theatres in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualised and constantly visible' (Foucault 1977:200). What is thus achieved is a form of power that is continuous and anonymous, so architecturally perfect that anyone could operate the mechanisms of power as long as he was in the correct position, and anyone - criminal, patient, deviant, schoolboy, worker or wife - could be subjected to it. Moreover, 'even if there is no guardian present, the power apparatus still operates perfectly. The inmate cannot see whether or not the guardian is in the tower, so must behave as if surveillance were perpetual and total. If the prisoner is never sure when he is being observed, he becomes his own guardian' (Rabinow 1984:19). The architectural perfection of the panopticon is such that it can also be used as a mechanism for observing and controlling the controllers. As Foucault (1977:204) explains:

> In this central tower, the director may spy on all the employees that he has under his orders: nurses, doctors, foremen, teachers, warders; he will be able to judge them continuously, alter their behaviour, impose upon them the methods he thinks best; and it will even be possible to observe the director himself.

Thus, everyone is caught in the machine, those who exercise the power and those who are subjected to it. By inducing a state of conscious and permanent visibility the panopticon transforms the inmate into the instrument of his own subjugation, and thereby guarantees the automatic functioning of power. It is simultaneously both individualising and totalising.

As a paradigm for modern bureaucratic forms of power and control, the panopticon provides important insights into the way current policy initiatives function. The remainder of this paper charts some of the various ways in which the new systems for assessing quality in university research and teaching might be analysed in terms of Foucauldian categories.

The Mechanisms of Quality Control

The Government's White Paper entitled 'Higher Education: A New Framework' distinguishes between three mechanisms designed to ensure quality in Higher Education.[3] 'Quality Control' entails individual Institutions codifying and then constantly reviewing and improving the internal monitoring systems they have set up with the express purpose of 'maintaining and enhancing the quality of their provision'. 'Quality Audit' involves external bodies scrutinizing the effectiveness of such monitoring systems.[4] Finally, 'Quality Assessment' entails 'external review of, and judgement about, the quality of teaching and learning in Institutions'. Whilst the first two mechanisms have no direct external funding implications, they are commonly perceived as having been put in place in order to preempt the work of the Quality Assessors, the Government-appointed inspectorates whose findings would have an immediate effect on funding for Institutions.

In reality, the three mechanisms, despite involving different agencies with different mandates, can be viewed as complementary components of the Government's plan for reforming Higher Education. By adopting the Quality Assessors' discourse of management and by providing the requisite performance indicators, the 'Quality Control' and 'Quality Audit' exercises have made universities yet more vulnerable to direct intervention from the outside. Like Bentham's prisoners, university staff become more or less unwitting accomplices in the setting-up of a wider system of imprisonment. In Foucauldian terms, this is a classic example of the moulding of subjectivity through the internalisation of externally-imposed norms.

Quality Assessment: Underlying Rationality

According to HEFCE documents, the purpose of Quality Assessment (and therefore of Quality Audit and Quality Control) is to 'ensure that all education for which the HEFCE provides funding is of satisfactory quality or better, and to ensure speedy rectification of unsatisfactory quality'; the ultimate aim being to 'inform funding and reward excellence' (HEFCE 1992; 1993). Quality can be guaranteed, it is claimed, through careful monitoring and measurement of performance and productivity. These objects of surveillance are assessed using a combination of statistical indices, external inspectors, institutional appraisal and, ultimately, critical self-appraisal on the basis of performance targets agreed with one's line-manager. In theory, these techniques offer an objective, rational and fair system for assessing and ensuring quality and excellence in teaching and research. Many of the techniques themselves are derived largely from the Total Quality Management ('TQM') approach to quality assurance developed in Japan. The main aspects of this approach, as one college principal wrote recently, can be summarised as follows:

- it is based on the notion that organisations should put their customers at the centre of all they do and on the assumption that there is always a need for continuous quality improvement;
- management in TQM is based on the idea that everyone in the organisation should be 'empowered', that is, that they should be the manager of their own areas of responsibility;
- Quality Assurance needs to be management-led and -driven, but responsibility for quality should be given to those most able to determine it: quality is in fact everyone's responsibility.

The HEFCE Quality Assessment mechanisms reflect these ideas. Individuals and departments are the managers of their own areas of responsibility and must ensure the quality of their provision. The Quality Assurance exercise will in fact involve departments putting in "bids" for excellence; they will be required to classify themselves as 'excellent', 'satisfactory' or 'unsatisfactory'. Any claim of excellence

must be supported by copious evidence based on Performance Indicators (PIs) and Output and Fitness for Purpose. The HEFCE Assessment Inspectors will then, on the basis of a visit, confirm or contest the classification. To be labelled 'unsatisfactory' will be terminal, as the funding implications are immediate and departments will not be allowed to appeal or redeem themselves.

What is absent from this system, however, is any clear definition of what constitutes 'quality' or 'excellence'. When pressed, advocates of the system typically answer that quality equals 'effectiveness' and 'fitness for purpose', and that excellence entails, according to management-speak, demonstrating the existence of 'system' and providing 'value-added'. The official line cited in HEFCE documents is that 'the Council does not want to be prescriptive' and that 'all institutions can achieve excellence, measured against the objectives which they set for themselves' (HEFCE 1992). As a result, the system is seemingly decentralised and institutions and individuals are 'empowered' in the sense that they are 'invited' to define their own yardsticks for 'excellence'. However, this apparent 'freedom' is counterbalanced by the existence of externally-imposed inspectorates and the publication of results in competitive and hierarchical league tables, which in turn necessitate the standardisation of statistical indicators and assessment procedures.

In all of this, clear parallels emerge with the organisational philosophy underlying the panopticon in terms of the system's ability both to discipline and to punish. First, the structure of command makes it almost impossible to locate the source of ultimate authority. The government passes responsibility - both for Quality Control itself and for the definition of quality - onto the HEFCE which passes it on to individual institutions, which in turn, through the setting-up of Quality Audit and Quality Control Teams, pass it on to line-managers (committee members, deans, heads of department, etc.). State intervention in education is therefore disguised through the recruitment of intermediary agencies and bodies. What emerges from such 'procedures of partitioning and verticality' (Foucault 1977:220) is the

'technique of the continuous, individualising pyramid'. Like the prison inmate, the lecturer is rarely allowed to see where power lies; all s/he is aware of is a chain of command, a system of 'line-managers' receding towards the summit of an organisational pyramid. Ultimately, however, it is the individual lecturer who is expected to discipline him/herself, to be the agent responsible for setting and achieving targets.

The system thus achieves its first aim: economy and coercion through the isolation and objectification of the subject and through the subject's internalisation of the disciplinary mechanism itself. In such a system of control, the prisoner becomes his/her own guardian, and individual lecturers monitor their own behaviour. The circle of policing is thus complete: the new power is continuous and anonymous, and the 'architectural perfection' is such that the system works whether or not the inspector is in the tower.

Furthermore, these dividing and objectifying practices are reinforced through the emphasis that is placed on performance indicators which themselves create new objects and subjects for disciplinary configurations of knowledge and power. Thus, with the collation of statistics on research, fund-raising, teaching and other activities, not only are staff obliged to compete against each other, but department is pitted against department, and university is ranked against university in coercive and hierarchical league tables. This fact gives the lie to the HEFCE rhetoric of 'empowerment' and 'decentralisation': while Quality Assurance is supposed to take place 'as close to the point of delivery as possible', the resultant statistics are collated centrally, first on an institutional and then on a national level. Should this prove insufficient to guarantee maximum obedience and productivity, sanctions can be mobilised against individuals. These include the publication of the names of those now classified as 'non-research active' and the policy of linking performance with departmental funding and, beyond that, with individual salaries and promotion prospects.

Effects on Academic Standards

Such compulsory assessment and talk of performance-related pay are further illustrations of the kinds of strategies and practices Foucault documents for isolating and objectifying the individual. In the new university regime, the curriculum vitae and list of publications - which are quintessentially individualistic - become instruments of social stratification which reinforce vertical axes of power at the expense of horizontal bonds of solidarity. To further this 'divide and rule' policy, new contracts are being drawn up (so far mostly in the former polytechnics) to emphasise still further divisions among former equals. Performance indices thus become pseudo-scientific instruments for a system of total stratification.

What are the effects of all this on the individual lecturer? One of the main effects of this has been described by some lecturers as 'permanent institutionalised angst'. The system plays, above all, on the insecurities of the disciplined subjects. With no fixed, shared or officially defined standards for excellence, the lecturer is impelled toward an endless and relentless quest to improve his/her performance and to achieve what is in effect the unattainable goal of 'total quality' in all of their duties. While management theory might hold that this has a beneficial effect (since the employee is goaded towards constant self-improvement), in reality, particularly in the context of higher education, this situation results in fear, destructive internal rivalries and the fragmentation of solidarity.

Most ironically and importantly of all, the Quality Control Exercises - and the application of management techniques and structures to Higher Education in general - actually lead to a lowering of academic standards. Management teams increasingly remote from classroom practice decide and enforce many aspects of educational policy. Management styles, values and goals are being written into university mission statements with the result that teaching is becoming increasingly bureaucratised, standardised and quantified. The learning experience - if it is counted at all - must now be controlled and audited, the new philosophy being that

what cannot be measured is devalued: the value of the curriculum is measured in terms of finite, tangible, transferable and, above all, marketable skills; modularisation and Credit Accumulation and Transfer Schemes (CATS) lead to the quantification of student work-hours; constant assessment and auditing mean that course objectives and teaching methods have to be reorientated to suit Management Teams' mission statements. In short, unpredictability and personal growth are seen as liberal concepts of a bygone era and are being replaced by a new form of populism whereby the availability of courses and the way in which they are structured is dependent upon the extent of customer demand. According to official discourse, this accountability to customers and management has given rise to a new Quality Culture in Higher Education. Critics, however, have dubbed this a 'compliance culture' in which emphasis is placed on form rather than content and where noncompliance with the management drive for normalisation and standardisation is to be punished.

In the field of research, the rewards and sanctions associated with the research assessment exercise have led many lecturers to focus more on quantity of research output than on quality. Indeed, as Chapman and Webster (1993:17) point out, the research selectivity panels are not always clear on the distinction between the two concepts: 'the unavoidable if unpalatable conclusion is that an important measure of quality is how much one publishes'. As a result, many lecturers no longer even consider the possibility of preparing well-researched and time-consuming books but focus instead on short-term research projects. Universities, meanwhile, seem increasingly to place the emphasis not on individual research but on setting up new 'research centres' as they struggle to develop Unique Selling Points (USPs) which will attract attention and funding.

The effect of all this, according to many university lecturers, is not the increased efficiency, quality and savings implied by management theory, but quite the reverse. Indeed, the recent reforms seem to have led university management teams to focus less on the question of standards than on the desperate need to find ways of 'driving down unit costs' such as merging departments, setting up new MA

courses without additional resources, increasing administrative loads on lecturers, and the introduction of semesterisation and two-year degree courses which can maximise the use of the university site.

The irony is that the increasingly expensive internal control exercises are in fact eating into their already depleted budgets. For example, one of Britain's smallest universities - which recorded a net shortfall of £500,000 in the 1992-93 research selectivity exercise - estimated that the cost of that exercise, which involved 'collecting and checking over 2,500 pieces of paper detailing staff publications and activities, was around £55,000'.[5]

Conclusion

As this brief account has argued, education policy is a discourse of power. While the changes introduced by government act directly upon the individual subject, the lecturer, the discrimination and bias that result from them are not 'personal'. On the contrary, the process is extremely impersonal: the setting-up of an administrative machine geared to efficiency and productivity, whose goal is to normalise and control 'anomalies' in the social body, and to forge docile, malleable subjects. While the measures are no doubt consistent with Bentham's panopticon principles of 'inspectability', economy and rational administration, all this is a far cry from 'education' as understood by most university staff. Government policy, however, prefers a system of training and discipline to education; an orderly regime structured according to the principles of market-authoritarianism where Total Quality Management, the bureaucracy of statistics and external quality kitemarks of the 'BS 5750' variety have become substitutes for any serious measure of quality in the educational experience.[6] This disciplining of education according to imported management theories, however, has already resulted in intellectual impoverishment and the lowering of university standards.

Critics of higher education have often emphasised its hidden ideological agenda

and its role as a vehicle of (middle) class domination and social control.[7] Marxist scholars have gone even further, equating universities with the kinds of 'ideological state apparatuses' identified by Althusser and other theorists. A Foucauldian analysis suggests we should move beyond this and explore some of the ways that universities themselves are incorporated into the system of state power. A better understanding of how this process works might help to identify ways of resisting some of the more negative aspects such incorporation brings.

Although it remained an unrealised architectural blueprint,[8] Bentham's panopticon offers more than simply a metaphor for modern systems of bureaucratic power and control. What interests us, as it did Foucault, is the thinking that made such an invention historically possible. Foucault saw the panopticon as but one illustration of the spread of government and the rise of disciplinary institutions. Yet the principles which inspired it were largely those of liberalism and philanthropy. For Bentham the panopticon was simply a mechanism for organising individuals most effectively and economically within a penitentiary. The rationality that accompanies such a technology is, as Rabinow (1984:20) notes, 'self-contained and non-theoretical, geared to efficiency and productivity'. For Bentham, what the panopticon offered (and hence its appeal to utilitarian liberals) was a generalisable tool, one that could be adapted for a variety of settings and purposes.[9] We suggest that it is these principles of panopticism - rather than any belief in the 'quality' of learning or the value of education *per se* - which offer the best insight into the epistemology that underlies current government reforms of Higher Education.

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Notes:

1. See in particular Foucault's essay on 'Governmentality' (1991).

2. On the relationship between panopticism, bio-power and the rise of capitalism, see also Foucault 1977:220-228.

3. The points we make here are largely in regard to the assessment of teaching. They are equally applicable, however, to the research selectivity exercises.

4. Such bodies form part of the Division of Quality Audit (DVA) which is a branch of the Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC) set up by the CVCP, SCFCS and SCOP.

5. Figures cited in The Goldsmiths' Society 1993, (4) February, p.10.

6. As several critics have noted, the most important measure of quality in education - the learning experience - has been largely ignored in the current quality assessment procedures (cf. Barnett 1992; Warren 1992).

7. See, for example, Shotton 1990.

8. As Gordon (1991:26) notes, Bentham's proposal for the panopticon was eventually rejected by the British government, after lengthy deliberation, and despite Bentham's offer personally to build and operate one.

9. As Colin Gordon observes (1991:27), Bentham's Panoptic principle of 'inspectability' was also commented on by Karl Polanyi, who noted its applications to ministries and civil servants as well as prisoners and convicts.

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